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Identity, Sexuality, and the Body:
Alice Neel’s Pregnancy Series, 1964-1978
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Since God was made a man and all the symbols of strength and power have been made man, naturally women are male chauvinist enough to wish to identify utterly with these magnificent beings, so there can be no feminine sensibility because per se it would be inferior. I have always wanted to paint as a woman but as the oppressive and power mad world thought a woman should paint... The enemy is perhaps not men but the very system itself which also encourages men to oppress each other.¹

Introduction

Alice Neel is remembered today as a “painter of people” who earned notoriety during the feminist movement in the 1970s. It was not until well into her seventies that she was treated seriously as an artist, when she was embraced by the feminist movement. However, Neel’s relationship to the feminist art movement is by no means straightforward. During the second wave of feminism, when women were advocating for better health care, equal wages and zero tolerance for discrimination in the workplace, Neel choose to paint the one thing that would threaten such goals: pregnancy. While most women artists avoided the subject, Neel painted seven portraits of pregnant women between 1964 and 1978. She depicts pregnancy honestly through body language and choice of color palette, and positions the gaze in the control of the sitter. It is necessary to examine these portraits for although they were painted during a prominent time during the Women’s Liberation Movement, they are the least studied and exhibited among Neel’s works.² This thesis examines Neel’s pregnancy series by situating it within feminist theory regarding pregnancy during the second wave movement and comparing it

² In my research, I found that three of the seven pregnant portraits were exhibited most recently in 2010 in Neel’s first major retrospective since 1966 at the Robert Miller Gallery, The Pregnant Nudes of Alice Neel, 9 January 1966 – 3rd February 1966.
to historical and contemporary representations of the nude female in order to better understand Neel’s intention behind the series. The pregnancy portraits challenge the stereotype of depicting a female nude, but they do not follow the feminist’s political agenda.

Most of Neel’s work from the 1970s has been claimed as part of the feminist art movement’s push back against the Western tradition of the female nude. Feminist artists desired to reclaim the body through ideas of sexuality, self-love, and female genitalia because they were active critics of male fantasies and sexuality.\(^3\) Traditionally, the female nude was supposed to arouse an erotic feeling in the (male) viewer, as the art historian Kenneth Clark states, “no nude, however abstract, should fail to arouse in the spectator some vestige of erotic feeling, even though it be only the faintest shadow – and if it does not do so, it is bad art and false morals.”\(^4\) Artists like Judy Chicago, Carolee Schneemann, and Hannah Wilke used “cunt-positive” imagery as a way of reclaiming their sexuality from the public (male) domain.\(^5\) However, some critics questioned how conducive it was for women to use their own bodies as sex objects because artists ran the risk of being misinterpreted as narcissistic and reinforcing objectifying stereotypes of women.

While feminist artists were redefining the female body, the pregnant body was off limits because of the controversial status of pregnancy during the second wave of feminism. In the 1960s and 1970s the movement focused on shattering discrimination and unequal salaries in the workplace. Pregnancy was a source of such workplace discrimination. Indeed, the first anti-discrimination law addressing pregnancy was not passed until 1978, when Neel painted the last portrait in her pregnancy series. In 1960, the Food and Drug Administration legalized the first

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commercially available contraceptive, Enovid, which broke down the double standard of men being able to enjoy premarital sex when women could not. Pregnancy was now seen as a choice to tie oneself to the traditional role of wife and mother. Losing feminine identity as a result of pregnancy was also a motif from literature from the time, such as Simone De Beauvoir’s *The Second Sex* (1949), Betty Friedman’s *The Feminine Mystique* (1963), Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born* (1976). Feminist artists thus largely avoided depictions of maternity, as they would only complicate the movement’s goal of redefining and reclaiming the female nude.

Neel’s statements about Women’s Liberation reveal a conflicted relationship with it. While the feminist movement gave her the opportunity to finally have connections in the art world and be recognized by feminist art critics who she coincidentally painted, she never painted works specifically for the movement. For example, she stated in an interview in 1975, “Sisterhood! ...Why there’s nothing more competitive than the women’s movement. It shows the competitiveness in American life.”

One of the most obvious ways Neel deviated from the feminist art movement was her choice to depict pregnancy. The feminist notion that preganability is the basis of female oppression conflicts with the message of Neel’s pregnant nude series. The paintings neither idealize nor dramatize the horrors of pregnancy. They deviate from feminist fears by highlighting certain strengths that make these women more than just the maternity that their pregnant bellies and swollen breasts represent. By using body language and gaze to represent the psychology of her pregnant sitters, Neel’s series contradicted feminist critiques of motherhood in the 1970s.

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7 Ibid., 191.
However, other aspects of Neel’s series merge with and show the influence of the feminist art movement. They contribute to the movement’s challenge to the traditional female nude. Neel’s forthright nudes, often in awkward poses, do not strive to invite or excite the male audience. Throughout Neel’s career, she was naturally drawn to paint from life things that would be considered grotesque and not aesthetically pleasing. She confronts the nude figure by removing them from the ideological realm of the academic classroom and instead uncovers the zeitgeist or spirit of life in the individual.8 Furthermore, comparing Neel’s pregnancy series to pregnant portraits she created in the 1930s shows that she depicted her sitters in the 1970s as much more resilient, assertive, and empowering. This revelation complicates the notion that the pregnancy series is outside the purview of feminism by suggesting that she was influenced by and participated in the restoration of female subjectivity during Women’s Liberation.

As the rest of this paper explores, Neel’s portraits of pregnant women from the 1960s and 1970s allude to the feminist movement in being rebellious against the Western tradition of the female nude, but they also remain independent from its agenda. Indeed, comparing Neel’s series to traditional depictions of the female nude and of maternity shows that while Neel’s subject put her at odds with the feminist movement, there were also ways in which her work aligned with its goals. The portraits were a way of documenting the loss of identity that occurs during pregnancy, while also depicting modern women in control of their bodies and sexuality.

NEEL’S RELATIONSHIP WITH FEMINISM

_I don't give a damn. I was women’s lib before there was women’s lib._9

From an early age, Neel forged an unconventional path. She persevered working in a

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8 Ibid., 220.

male dominated field and to work with an arguably dying art form, portraiture. Of being a woman in a densely male-populated field, she stated in 1972 that, “In the beginning, I much preferred men to women. For one thing I felt that women represented a dreary way of life always helping a man and never performing themselves, whereas I wanted to be the artist myself!” Her attitude towards life, painting people, and her experiences in the art world form a significant context for the pregnancy series.

Alice Hartley Neel was born in Merion Square, Pennsylvania in 1900, then moved as a young child to Cowlyn, a Philadelphia suburb. The fourth of five children in a middle-class family, she became independent at a very young age. In 1918, after high school, she completed a business course, passed the civil service exam and became a secretary in the Army Air Corps. After taking evening classes at the School of Industrial Art, she left her job, and attended the United States’ largest art school, the Philadelphia School of Design for Women. She fell in love and married Cuban artist Carlos Enriquez, with whom she had her first daughter, who died as an infant in 1927 of diphtheria. Enriquez later took their second daughter to be raised by relatives in Cuba. Neel allowed it though. “You see,” she stated of this decision. “I always had this awful dichotomy. I loved Isabetta, of course I did. But I wanted to paint.” This quote indicates that Neel had experienced the same feeling that feminists had argued was preventing women from pursuing their professional careers, perhaps explaining why her later portraits of motherhood and pregnancy differ from those of the 1930s.

In 1933, Neel enrolled in the Public Works of Art Project, which assisted professional

artists who demonstrated an economic need. She was expected to submit works about life in the city. She later had trouble remaining in the program when in 1934 she submitted a painting that was “of good artistic merit but was so inappropriate that it was considered useless.” Art historian Susan Rosenberg assumes it was a nude, subjects that were illegal to produce for the PWAP. When the Worker’s Program Administration, WPA, replaced the PWAP, Neel was required to submit a painting every six weeks in exchange for assistance. The organization put limits on the kinds of work she was supposed to submit in order to receive income, but those limitations did not hinder her from establishing her own style and affinity for painting the social and political world. She believed that art catalyzed change. Since the very beginning of her art career she strayed from trends and stuck to her own expectations.

From the 1930s, in her days of working for the PWAP and, later, the WPA, Neel painted to survive, but she chose subjects that she was observing from her environment, like Well-Baby Clinic (1928-1929) (Fig. 1). In Well-Baby Clinic, one can see the hypocritical condition of an institution that is supposed to be calm, organized, and nurturing for its patients, but is in fact absolutely chaotic. Tamar Garb writes of Neel’s social commitments as an artist:

Art was, from the start for Neel, a means of revealing existing forms of oppression and exploitation as well as representing the real social relations under which contemporary life was lived. In this sense, even though she sometimes deployed distortion and exaggeration for effect, Neel certainly was a realist, nurtured and formed in the 1930s left-wing political and artistic circles of Greenwich Village, where a politically committed art was regarded as the only one worth defending.

15 Allara, Pictures of People, 53.
16 Rosenberg, “People as Evidence,” 35.
As one of Neel’s earliest depictions of maternity, *Well-Baby Clinic* reveals how she was not inclined to depict an idealized image of nurture. A second painting that affirms this is *Degenerate Madonna* (1930), she depicts a non-nurturing female flanked by ghostlike children (Fig. 2). One can see the reference to the traditional Madonna and Child in this portrait, but rather than idealizing it, Neel removes the promise of motherhood an innate thing that women are born to know how to do. These expressionistic paintings were created at the same time of her losing her child, which may account for their overt emotional appeal.

Her work was sincere from the beginning of her career, as she stated that she was interested in capturing the zeitgeist or spirit of the time.\(^\text{20}\) At the time, she lived in Spanish Harlem and Greenwich Village, neighborhoods that were exposed to bohemian life. She painted class distinctions and the inhumanity of society’s “haves” and “have nots” in her portraits, revealing the effects of class, ethnicity, and age on women’s identity and place in society. When she visited Cuba with her husband she realized, “Cuban women often dance with each other. They just do not have to hang around a man’s neck the way American women do. They have more self than American women…”\(^\text{21}\) Neel was drawn to women who did not identify with passive, inferior gender stereotypes and painted women who defied social norms.

Furthermore, Neel’s interest in the “self” was apparent in her earliest works. Being able to have a strong sense of self was something that Neel consistently portrayed in her portraits, as it was her desire to capture one’s identity in such a way that it uncovered something that the sitter would not have realized until the portrait was over. In the following quote, artist Marlene Dumas identifies what distinguishes Neel as a portraitist:


Most figurative painters of the late twentieth century placed their figures in a sort of nowhere or nonspace. Alice always located her subjects…. Critics love the noun, placing the emphasis on the wrong spot. Alice used the verb. She identified. It is about identifying with, to find the right balance in the power struggle between the artist and his or her subject.22

When art historian Mary D. Garrard was painted by Neel in 1977, she felt that the artist had confronted her with more identity than she was willing to share, and that the portrait has a bit of “how dare you” and a little “what of it.” She explained: “In each of us, there are suppressed and minimized parts of our personalities that sometimes need expressing. In pulling that out of me, Alice did me a favor.”23 Neel’s ability to draw out the true self of the individual by relating to it demonstrates her commitment to recording the individual and their zeitgeist in her portraits. This knowledge brings us one step closer to understanding Neel’s intention to paint the female nude pregnant.

During the 1970s, she painted the new generation of leftist women activists and artists who were leading the Women’s Movement. Irene Pesilikis, who Neel painted in 1969 as Marxist Girl, was the founder of the first feminist art journal, Women and Art. This journal consequently featured two pieces on Neel, which was also the first time she was recognized by feminists.24 She also painted women who made a name for themselves as activists, intellectuals, and artists such as Adrienne Rich (1973), Susan Rossen (1976), Mary D. Garrard (1977), Cindy Nemser (1975), Linda Nochlin (1973), Marisol (1981), Sari Dienes (1976), Louise Lieber (1975), and Faith Ringgold (1976).25 Neel was painting women who were taking an active role in society, thus breaking down the traditional image of women as dutiful wives and nurturing mothers.

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25 Ibid., 392.
Indeed, Neel was embraced by the feminist art movement. From 1973 to 1975, she participated in at least eight exhibitions devoted to the work specifically of women, organized by the Women’s Interart Center and Women in the Arts. In 1968, she participated in a protest, rallying against the absence of women and African American artists in the Whitney Museum of American Art’s exhibition *1930s: Painting and Sculpture in America*. In 1976, Neel received the International Women’s Year Award in recognition of outstanding cultural contributions and dedication to women and art. She was also inducted into the National Institute of Arts and Letters (the precursor to the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters and the highest formal recognition of artistic merit in the United States). Feminists embraced Neel as a role model who weathered decades of sexism and obscurity and had continued painting. Neel had been painting for fifty years without her first retrospective until women artists signed a petition to protest the Whitney Painting Annual, and in 1974, she was awarded her first retrospective.

Even though she travelled to many colleges and panels regarding feminism in the 1970s, she said things that made her sound ambivalent towards the movement. At times, Neel described how she always needed Women’s Liberation to free her in order to claim her identity as an artist:

> When the children were small, I worked at night, which was hard to do… Also, I used to act dumber—in the thirties, at least, men liked you better dumber. I was in the exhibition The New York Group in 1938 at the ACA Gallery—seven men and I. They were so embarrassed because I was a woman, but I didn’t feel any different from them. They didn’t understand. I always needed Women’s Lib. I had it inside me, but outside, these people ran over me even though I was a much better painter.

27All facts from this paragraph are from Bauer, “Feminist and Leftist Portraits,” 390.
28 Henry Hope, “Alice Neel’s Female Nudes,” Woman’s Art Journal 15, no. 2 (Autumn 1994-Winter 1995), 21-26. Hope also quotes Neel explaining her relationship with the women’s movement, “The women’s lib movement is giving the women the right to openly practice what I had to do in an underground way. I have always believed that women should resent and refuse to accept the gratuitous insults that men impose upon them. The woman artist is especially vulnerable and could be robbed of her confidence… I have only become known in the ‘sixties
Other times, however, she faulted the movement. At the opening of “Women Artists, 1550-1950,” for example, she stated, “What amazed me was that all the women critics respect you if you paint your own pussy as a women’s libber, but they didn’t have any respect for being able to see politically and appraise the third world.”  

She never admitted to painting angrily towards the male population like other feminist artists. In an interview with Cindy Nemser for Arttalk, Neel refused to buy into the suggestion that she had been victimized by men, nor would she identify an “anti-male” element in her work: “I don’t think women should take any crap, any insults, any putting down; they should fight for all of it. But I don’t think we should fight each other. . . . Both men and women are wretched and often it’s a matter of how much money you have rather than what your sex is.”

She also expressed her disappointment at how the sisterhood turned out to be just as limiting as before Women’s Liberation, “All my life I’ve been interested in women’s lib. I’ve read all the books; I’ve picketed; I’ve given talks on the subject – for example, at Cornell. Guess what women’s lib has to fight now? Segregation. A cocktail party was given in our honor at Cornell – but only women came.”

She felt at odds with the sisterhood because it felt too limiting and too exclusive.

In the 1970s, many older female artists of Neel’s generation were interpreted as feminists although they had resisted the label; such artists as Georgia O’Keefe, Elizabeth Murray, and Lee Krasner struggled to distinguish their careers from the feminist movement. Denise Bauer argued that because Neel was born in a different generation, she and other artists her age did not totally align themselves with feminists of the 1970s. Nancy Chodorow explored the causes of this lack

because, before, I could not defend myself.”

Pamela Allara, “‘Mater’ of Fact: Alice Neel’s Pregnant Nudes,” American Art 8, no. 2 (INSERT PUBLICATION YEAR IN PARENTHESIS HERE), 9.

Ibid., 9.

of gender consciousness in professional women of the previous generation in her essay “Seventies Questions for Thirties Women: Gender and Generation in a Study of Early Women Psychoanalysts.” Chodorow concluded that these women “were not gender-blind or un-attuned to gender . . . Rather, as products of their era, they split their public and domestic interpretations of gender. . . . If they were feminist, it was as participants in socialist or social democratic politics.” In other words, women of Neel’s generation did not consider themselves oppressed by men in general, but by a particular socio-economic system.

In sum, it is difficult to analyze Neel’s pregnancy portraits of the 1970s as definitively participating in the feminist movement since she expressed ambiguous sentiment towards the movement. Alice Neel had been redefining the nude figure since the 1920s, so there is no coincidence that Neel chose to reinvent the nude figure by painting pregnant women. However, the lack of representation on this taboo subject may have provoked Neel to paint pregnant women nude. Although she had participated and advocated for Women’s Liberation, she never explicitly declared her art, especially the pregnant series, as feminist, which makes them difficult to analyze. One of the main reasons why her portraits may be considered feminist is that they personify pregnancy as a trap. Another concern is that they prove that pregnancy brings about a loss of identity. However, I plan to argue that Neel was much more interested in capturing the transformation of the body rather than being anti-pregnancy with her portraits of pregnant women.

PREGNANCY AND FEMINISM

32 Allara, “‘Mater’ of Fact,” 8.
33 Quoted in Ibid.
34 Ibid., 9.
35 In my research, she never painted pregnant women with clothes on. In this regard, she is deliberately attacking the system of painting the nude figure as well as stating her ambivalence towards pregnancy.
Neel’s decision to paint pregnant women confirmed her ambiguous status within the feminist art movement. The 1970s was a time when gender discrimination in the work environment due to pregnancy was being justified in court specifically in 1987. The case was that of Lillian Garland, a bank receptionist. She was on leave for four months after giving birth and had expected her position back. However, after four months of unpaid leave, the position was no longer available. The Supreme Court ruled that Garland had the right to reclaim her job because she had job-protected disability. The feminist lawyers, however, felt that the reason for winning the case—calling pregnancy a disability—was unjust.36 Employers had the authority to fire workers on the basis of pregnancy well into the 1970s, and they also had the right to refuse to hire someone if they were pregnant. Many health insurance policies did not cover normal and caesarean deliveries. Employers also had the right to determine when the pregnant worker would stop working and when she would return. Women were often excluded from unemployment and disability eligibility benefits, so even though they would be unemployed and considered disabled by employers, there was no legislation protecting their right to work or compensation.

In 1960, a significant form of legislation passed that prompted women to claim the right to sexual and reproductive determination during the Women’s Liberation Movement. Four years before Neel painted the first portrait in her pregnant nude series, the Food and Drug Administration approved Enovid. Although officials passed it to prevent unwed pregnancy, it released women from the pressure of reproducing in marriage and increased their sexual

36 The facts for this discussion are from Lise Vogel, “Debating Difference: Feminism, Pregnancy, and the Workplace,” Feminist Studies 16, no. 1 (Spring 1990), 9-32. Vogel explains how the lag in legislation in the United States versus other countries set women’s rights back in the workplace. There were protective laws that limited women’s hours of work, regulated their working conditions, and prohibited female labor in potentially dangerous occupations.
Women were more in control of their bodies and their destinies, as they fought the stigma that being female required them to put their careers on hold to bear children. Even though the pill was not universally available (by 1967 only 45 percent of the nation’s college health services prescribed the pill for students), leading some feminists to agree with Gloria Steinem that “The pill is obviously important to the sexual and the contraceptive revolutions, but it is not the opening bombshell of either one,” it was still a significant step towards women’s liberation.

The sexual revolution prompted by birth control influenced the artwork produced by the women’s movement. In the 1970s, feminist artists concentrated on converting the cultural construction “woman” into an instrument of power. In the Western tradition, the social philosophy that has been perpetually represented in art is the woman/nature and man/culture dichotomy. The naked woman in the landscape came to be seen as appropriate, ‘natural,’ the curves of her body symbolic of the landscape she inhabited. Another stereotype was the Goddess Mother with symbols of fertility such as flowers and fruit. Curator Gill Saunders references examples like Giorgione’s *Sleeping Venus* (1510), Courbet’s bathers (1853), Matisse’s nymphs (19th century), and Gaugin’s Tahitian girls (19th century). The depiction of the nude in a landscape setting has been programmed in society and art for such a long time that it is difficult to disassociate the female nude with ideas of fertility and acquiescent sexuality. Indeed, the theme of defining women’s destiny and repressing their sexuality in a patriarchal society has been established since the third century B.C. Feminist artworks criticized the traditional and avant-garde depiction of women to satisfy the male gaze.

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38 Ibid., 71 and 88.  
40 Ibid., 93.  
Many modern artists still clung to celebrating women’s role as a nurturer. Paul Gauguin, prominent painter in the late nineteenth century of Tahitian women and paradise motifs summed up his understanding of motherhood in the following statement: “In order to conceive a child, a woman must commit a little sin, but the sin is absolved by the most beautiful act, creation, a divine act in that it is the continuation of the work of the creator.”\(^\text{42}\) Not only does this conception of motherhood limit women’s ability to be seen as other than just a reproductive system, but it also perpetuates the limiting ideal of the nude in the Western tradition. As a nude portrait, if she was not objectified as a sexual goddess, she was celebrated for her fertility.

The feminist movement sought to reclaim women’s bodies from this objectifying tradition. In the 1970s the first Women’s Liberation Movement group exhibition was held in London, the Ad Hoc Women Artists’ Committee was established in New York, and Judy Chicago led women-only studio classes, while Faith Ringgold and Michele Wallace started the activist group, Women.\(^\text{43}\) Things were picking up for personalizing the political. Artists started to mix gender stereotypes, such as men in poses stereotyped as feminine, or traced suppressed elements in culture through investigation of matriarchal archetypes.\(^\text{44}\) In Sylvia Sleigh’s *Philip Golub Reclining* (1971), for example, a male with androgynous features is facing the viewer with his back, while Sleigh depicts herself in the mirror. The awkward composition overturns expectations of the pictorial hierarchy of male artist and female model in Western art.\(^\text{45}\)

Likewise, artists prominent during the Body Art Movement like Hannah Wilke and Carolee Schneemann were reclaiming the female nude by prominently featuring their own bodies.

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\(^{42}\) Ibid., 14.

\(^{43}\) Peggy Phelan and Helena Reckit, *Art and Feminism* (London: Phaidon, 2006), 105

\(^{44}\) Ibid., 69.

\(^{45}\) Ibid.
in their art.\textsuperscript{46} The body art movement paved the way for increasing women’s confidence and ownership of depicting their own bodies without concern for censorship. For example, Wilke’s work \textit{S.O.S. Starification Object Series} (1974-1982) represents the dichotomy between those who undergo beautification by choice and African women who are decorated with keloided designs (Fig. 3). Wilke poses nude, while she is “scarred” by chewing-gum sculptures in the shape of vulvas and wombs along her face, back, chest, breasts, and fingernails. Wilke as well as other artists from the Body Art Movement rebelled against Western tradition in order to retrieve it from the public (male) domain.\textsuperscript{47} However, despite the efforts of feminist artists to reclaim women’s bodies, pregnancy was still regarded as taboo.

There are many arguments as to why there is a lack of maternal representation in early second-generation feminist art. The pill enabled women to be equally promiscuous as men, and it promoted control over their bodies. In the early years of the movement, many believed it was impossible to be both a productive artist and mother. In addition to this theory, pregnancy and motherhood were avoided in art of the 1970s because the Western tradition of portraying the Virgin Mary was an ‘asexual fantasy of femininity,’ as explained here in Simone de Beauvoir’s \textit{Second Sex}:

\begin{quote}
It was as Mother that woman was fearsome; it is in maternity that she must be transfigured and enslaved. The virginity of Mary has above all a negative quality: that through which the flesh has been redeemed is not carnal; it has not been touched or possessed … Mary knew not the stain of sexuality.\textsuperscript{48}
\end{quote}

Mary was a damaging representative of motherhood because she was a passive vessel who did not have a choice but to give birth. The tradition of representing the Madonna and Child has

\textsuperscript{46} Joanna Frueh, “The Body Through Women’s Eyes,” 192.
\textsuperscript{47} Information regarding Wilke and her work in Ibid., 190.
created the expectation in art history that women, especially mothers, should be pure. Finally, art historian Anne Kaplan argues that young feminist artists of the 1970s failed to gravitate to maternal images because they were in a stage of rebellion against their mothers, “figures whom they regarded as regents inculcating patriarchal values in their own offspring.”

In the 1970s, feminists did not believe that the ability to give birth and produce milk meant that all females were supposed to reproduce and therefore develop traditionally feminine qualities. The generation of the seventies embraced the release from bourgeois female roles and identities, and writings like *Sisterhood is Powerful* (1970) accelerated the desire for women’s liberation from their oppressive roles as housewife and mother. Feminist writers like Susan Brownmiller argued that “Pregnability . . . has been the basis of female identity, the limit of freedom, the futility of education, and the denial of growth.” Likewise, body art practitioners, like Hannah Wilke, Carolee Schneemann, and Adrian Piper were taking deliberate action in their works to prove that women are not biologically programmed, supporting the theory that pregnancy degrades a female’s identity. Art historian Joanna Freuh argues that “Feminist artists’ avoidance of pregnancy and motherhood as subjects should not be seen as anti-pregnancy or anti-motherhood, but rather as a sad professional necessity rooted in fear.” Yet, Neel defied that prohibition by painting something that feminists saw as harmful to their cause by painting not one nude female pregnant but seven in a span of less than ten years.

A few artists of the feminist movement ventured with Neel into the taboo subject of pregnancy. Unlike Neel, however, they represented pregnancy in self-portraits. Susan Hiller used

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49 Anne Kaplan quoted in Ibid., 134.
51 Allara, “‘Mater’ of Fact”, 9.
52 Brownmiller quoted in Pamela Allara, “‘Mater’ of Fact,” 22.
54 Ibid., 195.
photography to document her pregnant body in *10 Months*, (1977-1978) (Fig. 4 and 5). Hiller recorded the “changing landscape of her abdomen” in a series of ten sets of photographs. They document the transformation without showing her face, leaving out the identity of the artist to focus solely on pregnancy. Saunders argues that Miller chose grainy black-and-white prints to “to break with the sentimental image of pregnancy.” The artist’s intention was not to idealize pregnancy but to purposely document the biological experience of the woman. Similarly, Cary Beth Cryor produced a series of five photographs entitled *Rites of Passage*, (1979). The photographs were captured by the artist while she gave birth, which showed that she, the artist and the mother, had control over the representation of her procreativity. These artists captured the experience of pregnancy as the participant and the observer whereas Neel was just the observer. Neel does not reduce the identity of the pregnant sitters to the act of being pregnant like Hiller or Cryor; their individuality is portrayed. Why depict pregnancy at the peak of the Women’s Liberation movement when pregnancy was dominantly seen as oppressive?

**ANALYSIS OF THE SERIES**

Over the course of a decade, Neel painted pregnancy despite its taboo status in feminism and the fact that women’s sexuality was deemed unacceptable in popular culture. “It isn’t what appeals to me, it’s just a fact of life,” Neel stated of pregnancy.

It’s a very important part of life and it was neglected. I feel as a subject it’s perfectly legitimate, and people out of false modesty or being sissies, never showed it, but it’s a basic fact of life. Also plastically, it is very exciting. I think its part of the human experience. Something the primitives did, but modern painters have shied away from

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57 Photographs were not able to be found for Cary Beth Cryor’s *Rites of Passage*, 1979, a circumstance indicative of how little known feminist works about pregnancy are.
58 Meskimmom, *Art of Reflection*, 143.
because women were always done as sex objects. A pregnant woman has a claim staked out; she’s not for sale.\footnote{Allara, \textit{Pictures of People}, 223.}

Neel’s comment suggests that the pregnancy series aligns with feminist art in that the portraits do not objectify the female body to satisfy the male gaze, but, unlike feminist theory at the time, it does not caution against pregnancy either. The following section examines the 1970s portraits in relation to Neel’s depictions of pregnancy and maternity from the 1930s and to historical and contemporary representations of the nude figure and maternity. This will show that the portraits were a way of painting pregnancy ‘as part of the human experience,’ while also depicting modern women in control of their individuality and sexual consciousness.

Neel’s depiction of pregnancy changed dramatically from the 1930s to the 1970s. Comparing Claudia Bach (1975) with her earliest depiction of pregnancy, Childbirth (1939), shows that she started to represent her pregnant sitters as stronger and more self-possessed – changes that align with the feminist art movement’s reinvention of the female nude, but contradict feminism’s characterization of pregnancy as a loss of self (Figs. 6 and 7). Claudia Bach (1975), for example, displays a woman interacting in a relaxed but engaged way with the artist/viewer. The woman in Childbirth, by contrast, is distracted, like she is resisting, and turns away from the viewer. She wants to isolate herself from the viewer and the situation. Isolation and removal of one’s identity is something that feminist theorists like Brownmiller attributed to pregnancy. By showing Bach in possession of the gaze, Neel diverges from the feminist agenda. However, her portrait fits with the feminist art movement’s goal to remove the female nude from the male gaze by returning that power to her.

Furthermore, the two paintings evoke opposite experiences of maternity. In both portraits, Neel uses the sitter’s leg to create a diagonal and emphasizes the face by framing it with arms.
Although the composition is similarly set up with the sitter pressed forward in the picture plane, eliminating the distance from the viewer, the two sitters exude very different emotions and physical states. In *Childbirth*, Neel uses the repetition of lines in the drapery and the bedpost to echo the waves of the sitter’s hair. Her leg is bent at a right angle, with her blanket covering her lower region, and her swollen stomach and breasts lead the eye to her facial expression. Her arms frame her head unnaturally, making it seem like she has met her ultimate battle. Her battle scars are covered except for dark circles around her eyes and her bloated stomach and breasts. Her gaze looks like it is far away in the distance, unable to focus in the present. To depict the aftermath of pregnancy was entirely taboo especially in the 1930s let alone in the 1970s. Neel had painted *Childbirth* in remembrance of her hospital mate but also to draw attention to the poor conditions for expecting mothers that were being overlooked in the country in the 1930s.\(^{60}\)

Unlike the woman in *Childbirth*, Bach does not appear ashamed of her body’s condition, as her forthright gaze signals. Unlike in *Childbirth*, the composition in *Claudia Bach* is symbiotic with her body. Neel uses the curve of the couch to echo her belly, and uses her arms to frame her face. Neel purposefully chooses to cut off part of the foot to further engage the viewer into the environment of the sitter. It leads their eye to pursue the rest of the body, and make eye contact. This is opposite from the woman in *Childbirth* whose leg is contained within the canvas that forms a right angle, throwing the perspective off. Bach’s confidence and easy, self-possessed inhabiting of her body aligns with the efforts of feminist artists’ to reclaim the nude, even as her pregnancy contradicts the movement.

*Pregnant Maria* (1964) shares many features with *Claudia Bach*(Fig. 8). It depicts a woman on her side reclined on a bed. The setting is relaxed and inviting. Neel’s focus is on

\(^{60}\) Ibid., 91.
Maria’s eyes and the angle at which her foot is partially cut off in the corner with her arm lightly resting on her thigh; she looks unapologetic and unashamed like Manet’s *Olympia* (1863). With Neel’s bold strokes of paint, *Pregnant Maria* cascades an emotion of confidence that is not entirely clear in her earlier painting *Blanche Angel Pregnant* (1937), as discussed by Allara (Fig. 9).61 Blanche Angel was a friend of Neel who had chosen to bear children outside of marriage, a choice that Neel made as well with her two sons later in life. Neel arguably connects the two portraits, *Blanche Angel Pregnant* and *Pregnant Maria*, with the power of their gaze to convey that Maria represents, as Allara argues, the “next generation of openly rebellious bohemian women.”62 After the availability of birth control, many feminists believed illegitimate pregnancy was no longer bohemian but a betrayal of the progress made to incorporate women into the workforce.63 This confirms my claim that Neel’s pregnancy series is not straightforwardly feminist.

Some scholars have argued that Neel’s pregnancy portraits are feminist in that they show that pregnancy alienates women from their bodies and dissociates them from society. Feminist scholar Joanna Frueh argues that Neel’s *Margaret Evans Pregnant* (1978) looks agitated and forced into stillness, compressed into the little space that she has on the stool to symbolize how the miracle of pregnancy feels like a trap (Fig. 10).64 However, I will argue that Neel presents Evans in a more individualistic way, so that the portrait ultimately reaffirms her sense of ‘self,’ contradicting feminists’ idea that pregnancy sacrifices the ego. Additionally, I will show that Neel was much more empathetic towards and amazed by her sitter’s condition than has been mentioned in prior scholarly works.

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61 Allara, “‘Mater’ of Fact,” 18.
63 Ibid., 18.
Michel Auder, a French-American videoartist, documented the first part of the sessions of *Margaret Evans Pregnant*. His video documents the process that includes setting up the composition as well as starting the painting. It proves that what has been perceived as uncomfortable is actually the opposite. Auder recalls, “she just put down Evans’ two empty eyes and a bit of the nose, maybe not even the mouth, and then she really started to concentrate on giving the stomach some kind of life in there, and then she went up.”

Auder’s recollection suggests that Neel was fascinated by Evans’ ability to generate life—an idea that complicates Frueh’s interpretation of the painting as presenting pregnancy as a trap.

Before she started painting, Neel directed Evans to sit in multiple positions in different furniture. Neel states aloud how standing would be hard on Evans, so she moves her first from the couch sitting up to reclining on her side. She then asks Evans to move to a chair that is slightly more engulfing than the one in the painting. From each position Evans willingly obeys and is asked by Neel if she is comfortable to which Evans replies, “I’m fine, it doesn’t really matter.” When Evans finally sits in the chair that makes it into the painting, Neel references how the arrangement will allow her to follow Pablo Picasso’s example of painting figures straightforward without “losing anything.” She also exclaims with delight that Evans looks like a “correct” pregnant woman. Her reaction proves that, far from wanting to depict pregnancy as a trap, she wanted to distract the viewer from doubting Evans’ condition, as also shown by the emphasis Neel places on the stomach and breasts.

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67 Ibid., 0:00-6:29.
One reason Frueh misinterprets *Margaret Evans Pregnant* is that she disregards Neel’s history of depicting the nude figure. As noted earlier, Neel had explored painting one’s individuality in the genre of the nude as early as the 1920s. *Ethel Ashton* (1930), for example, she displays the modern woman as a collapse of her ego, which contradicted the objectifying aesthetic of the nude (Fig. 11). Neel said of the painting: “Don’t you like her left leg on the right, that straight line? You see it’s very uncompromising. I can assure you, there was no one in the country doing nudes like this.” *Ethel Ashton* fails to live up to the Modern Woman personified by Zelda Fitzgerald and Coco Chanel, who were regarded as the ideal woman in society.

Instead, Neel depicts the “real” Modern Woman, a person with vulnerabilities with whom the viewer can empathize. Neel breaks down the idealization of the Modern Woman in the 1920s, as she would with the idealization of the Maternal Woman in the 1970s. Art historian Pamela Allara reasons Neel began to represent the nude as more than an anonymous figure because her concept of identity, the body, and sexuality were influenced by Frueidian theories prevalent in the Greenwich Village during the 1930s. Her work, Allara argues, most closely parallels James Joyce’s which does not make a religion of the sexually liberated body, but rather considers the body “matter-of-fact…a tragically rebellious servant and also cosmic.” This perspective helps explain the slight exaggeration in Evans’ face and elongated torso, as well as the reflection in the mirror. Frueh, in sum, misinterprets Neel’s intention because she fails to consider that Neel had already established a style of depicting the human form as more than academic and factual. Far

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69 Allara, *Pictures of People*, 223.
70 Ibid., 223. Neel had lived in the Greenwich Village neighborhood of New York for about ten years.
71 Ibid., 220.
from trapped by pregnancy, Evans is depicted as resilient and comfortable, as Auder’s film cooberates.

This subtlety is apparent when one compares Neel’s portrait to *Nude* (1952) by Raphael Soyer (1899-1987), a Russian-American painter and friend of Neel (Fig. 12). Soyer’s pregnant nude feels like a study, an anonymous entity, whereas Neel’s is about the current transformation that the sitter is undergoing. Soyer sets his model back from the picture plane, disconnecting the subject and the artist/viewer—a move which objectifies her sexuality for the public (male) domain. Neel’s use of color gives a flesh a more believable, less idealistic complexion than Soyer’s *Nude*. Evans’ pose is full frontal, whereas Soyer’s is three-quarter view, a position favored in the tradition of the nude. Soyer’s representation of the pregnant woman does not expose any truth about her experience; it just studies her anatomy. In this way, Soyer continues the Western tradition, while Neel rejects it. The model in *Nude* looks like her pregnancy is in a similar term as Evans, and yet she looks washed out, and her body language is mute. Compared to her, Evans is still clinging on to her identity. Evans sits upright in front of a mirror. Her bulging stomach is the focal point of the composition. Her demeanor is calm and patient. The chair back supports her, and her arms rest on its sides. Neel indicates Evans’ individuality in the unique way she paints the quality of her skin from the polka dots on her legs to the sunburn on her upper chest. Moreover, her alert gaze gives her an air of self-possession. Another point to acknowledge is that Soyer’s pregnant woman maintains her anonymity, whereas Evans’ name is attached to the work. *Margaret Evans Pregnant* aligns with feminist art by breaking from the traditional depiction of the nude figure, but it contradicts feminist ideas about pregnancy by maintaining the pregnant sitter’s identity.

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72 Soyer had also come from a different program of art education, where he was part of the “Art Students League” who championed academic ideology (Allara, *Pictures of People*, 221).
Neel’s desire to capture the individual personality of her nude sitter is also apparent in the series’ diversity. The emotion Evan’s conveys, for example, is very different from Claudia Bach, whose belly is barely pronounced and whose gaze is boldly directed towards the viewer, almost tempting them. Between Claudia Bach, who is shown in an early term, and Margaret Evans Pregnant, which depicts the sitter nine-months pregnant with twins, Neel paints two opposite sides of the spectrum of pregnancy. She maintains their individuality, comfort, and self-possessive gazes, and does not stereotype pregnancy as demeaning or oppressive. Neel depicts pregnancy as a complicated situation, one that plays out differently for every woman. In this way, Neel depicts the individuality of each sitter, rather than creating or perpetuating an archetype of fertility—a trope in the history of art that led many feminist artists to avoid maternal imagery.

Indeed, one way that the pregnancy series denies Western tradition is by rejecting the archetypal ‘Good Mother.’ The focus of the pregnancy portraits is the sitter with little description of her environment, whereas Paul Gauguin, for example, placed his nudes in a tropical paradise with symbols of fertility. Similarly, in Maurice Denis’s The Bathers (1899), mothers embrace their children beside classical nudes (Fig. 13). Although Denis dresses the mothers in contemporary clothing, they are not given individuality; they all look like mirror reflections of one another. French symbolists besides Denis, like Eugene Carrière, often used their own wives and children as models, but intentionally hid their personalities to move beyond a portrait likeness to display archetypal images of maternity.73 In this sense, the pregnant nude series coincides with the feminist movement for breaking away from the Western tradition of men depicting, and consequently stereotyping, a woman’s private experience.

73 These comparisons derive from Slatkin, “Maternity and Sexuality,” 14.
It was argued during the Women’s Liberation Movement that pregnancy enslaved the woman to deformity and sacrificed her ego, while the male was a bystander. “It is not the act of childbearing nor the task of childrearing which stamps women as inferior, but the value which male-dominant society has given to these necessary activities of social life,” Mary O’Brien noted. However, Neel chose to paint a more complex relationship between man and woman during pregnancy in Julie and Algis (1967) (Fig. 14). She was very interested in depicting relationships, as seen in the many paintings of couples she created at this time like Red Grooms and Mimi Gross (1967) and Cindy Nemser and Chuck (1975). Julie and Algis is the only portrait among the pregnancy series that includes a male’s full body. Although Julie had initially posed alone, Algis’s presence adds to the intense contrast between the figures as clothed versus nude, a difference that could be seen to support the feminist idea that women had to bear a burden that outweighed the man’s. It has been reasoned that Algis’ clothed body represents the patriarchal system in possession over the pregnant woman, thus enforcing the cultural expectations of a woman’s reproduction. However, I propose that Neel’s prior painting of a pregnant couple, Couple on a Train (1930), complicates this interpretation (Fig. 15).

There are a few differences between Julie and Algis and Couple on a Train, including the gaze, the clothing versus nudity, and the couples’ relationships. In Julie and Algis, Neel’s use of direct gaze focuses the viewer’s attention instantly, without fear or discomfort. In Couple on a Train, by contrast, they are both asleep, making the viewer feel like they are creeping up upon a private moment of slumber. While the focus of Couple on a Train is the disconnect between the husband and the pregnant woman, the focus in Julie and Algis is on their relationship. Julie and

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Algis is much more about the protectiveness Algis has over Julie, and the awareness Julie has over her body in the presence of the viewer. Julie is shown leaning on Algis for support, while also touching his shoulder. There is no sign of trouble or discomfort in Julie’s position that can be seen in *Couple on a Train*.

“Look how wretched she is. She’s pregnant,” said Neel of the woman in *Couple on a Train.* Neel’s response may imply her own troubling experiences of motherhood. She remembered the birth of Santillana around the time of painting *Couple on a Train* “for its pain, not its joy.” Neel has been seen as a painter who projects her own feelings on to the sitter, so her own changing feelings of motherhood may account for why, by the time she painted *Julie and Algis*, she no longer explicitly declared pregnancy oppressive (in contrast to the dominant feminist perception). When painting *Julie and Algis*, she had already become a grandmother and was able to focus solely on her artwork, circumstances which alleviated many of her initial, conflicted feelings about motherhood. The comparison suggests that *Julie and Algis* is not meant to perpetuate the second-wave feminist belief that pregnancy threatens a woman’s identity and enforces gender roles, but instead presents a much more positive image of a pregnant couple.

The development of Neel’s depiction of maternity is due not only to society’s changing conceptions of women, but her personal experience with motherhood. Neel had already given birth to four children by the 1970s. Her depictions of maternity in *Degenerate Madonna* (1930) and scenes of hospital care like *Well-Baby Clinic* (1928-29) were completed during a time when she had lost two daughters, one from death and one as a result of domestic trouble (Figs. 2 and 1). She had struggled with being a single mom and an artist in the 1930s. By the 1970s, she had

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77 Ibid., 45.
single handedly raised two children and put them through college. The attitude she had towards raising children definitely changed over the forty-year gap. Therefore, Neel’s personal life likely played a role in the changes that occurred in her depictions of pregnancy and the theme of maternity from the 1930s to the 1970s.

However, Neel’s depiction of pregnancy in Julie and Algis and the rest of the series are complicated, precisely because she treats pregnancy as a multi-faceted, individual experience. Thus, some aspects of her representation of pregnancy align with feminist views of it. As discussed earlier, depicting the maternal nature of a woman was avoided specifically because feminists advocated for equal rights in the workplace. The ability to be artist and mother, or at least working and a mother, was regarded as impossible. Even Neel felt this sentiment when explaining how she struggled to paint with two sons, dedicating her work for nighttime.\(^78\)

Additionally, pregnancy was seen as an asthenia or a disease that caused women to sacrifice their ego. The alienation that a woman has to bear while pregnant is described in the following quote from Adrienne Rich, radical feminist, poet, and essayist:

I try to distinguish between two meanings of motherhood, one superimposed on the other: the potential relationship of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the institution, which aims at ensuring that potential—and all women—shall remain under male control. This institution . . . has withheld over one-half the human species from the decisions affecting their lives; it exonerates men from fatherhood in any authentic sense; it creates the dangerous schism between “private” and “public life”; it calcifies human choices and potentialities. In the most fundamental and bewildering of contradictions, it has alienated women from our bodies by incarcerating us in them.\(^79\)

Neel conveys both systems that Rich describes without explicitly aligning with the feminist movement. One can see the institution of women under male control in Pregnant Julie and Algis and Pregnant Woman (1971) with the presence of the male figure (Fig. 16). Neel is

\(^{78}\) Allara, Pictures of People, 91.
\(^{79}\) Adrienne Rich quoted in Allara, Pictures of People, 238.
able to capture both males, even though one is more physically present than the other, so that their presence intensifies the vulnerability of the pregnant women in relation to them. The way Algis stares directly at the viewer with his arm around his nude wife, makes the viewer question his possessive nature. While in The Pregnant Woman, of Neel’s daughter-in-law, Nancy, her husband’s head hovers with a watchful eye, but from a distance. In both portraits, Neel shows how much more the woman has to physically and mentally bear as opposed to the man.

Besides depicting gender roles threatening the progress made by the Women’s Liberation Movement, some of Neel’s pregnancy portraits also align with the feminist idea that pregnancy leads to a loss of identity. Of Women Born (1976) by Rich was the first scholarly work published about the institution of motherhood. Rich sat for Neel in 1973, suggesting that Neel was aware of Rich’s ideologies. Rich conveys how her own experience as a woman and a mother influenced her beliefs about maternity. She speaks about how in early pregnancy the stirring of the fetus felt like “ghostly tremors” of her own body, like the movements of the being imprisoned in her.80 Nancy, Neel’s daughter-in-law, recalled how Neel similarly said once that in late pregnancy “your body ceases to be your own. You become a vessel. At a certain point you lose your self-image.”81 This opinion is echoed by psychoanalyst Estela Welldon who relayed the experience of a woman author who asked a large group of men whom they identified with when they saw a pregnant woman, to which almost all of them relied “the child.”82 Some aspects of Neel’s aforementioned paintings relay this idea. For instance, in Margaret Evans Pregnant, the first thing one notices is the stomach, then her face. In sum, while some of Neel’s portraits depict the

80 Adrienne Rich, Of Women Born (London: Virago, 1997), 63. However, Rich also contradicts her earlier quotes by stating that not every woman feels pregnancy as “imposing alien traits” on her (Ibid., 167).
81 Lewison, “Showing the Barbarity of Life,” 44.
82 Ibid.
loss of identity that can accompany pregnancy, when viewed in the context of the rest of the series, it is clear that they do so not to represent pregnancy as demeaning or oppressive, but rather as a complicated part of the human experience.

When viewed together, Neel’s two portraits of Nancy support this argument. In The Pregnant Woman (1967), Nancy is posed flat on her back as if she is about to give birth (Fig. 17). Her legs are slightly open, but her knees meet at a point. Her gaze is calm and direct, and her arm is bent in such a way that her hand is underneath the pillow. Her breasts and stomach are erect and round. There is something reminiscent in her pose of Suzanne Valadon’s Reclining Nude, 1928 (Fig. 18). She looks at the viewer directly; her foot cuts off in the corner of the canvas similarly, and the width of the sitter’s environment is cropped and pushed to the picture plane to further engage the sitter’s presence with the viewer. Both artists also did not use models, but average middle-class women. However, there are differences that indicate how Neel is reshaping the female nude more so than Valadon. She presents Nancy with her arms by her sides, while Valadon’s nude woman is covered modestly with a blanket. Valadon’s nude looks as if she is resisting the male gaze. Neel’s Pregnant Woman, by contrast, does not even acknowledge the male gaze, let alone show fear towards it. Valadon’s nude covers her breasts and closes her legs, as opposed to Neel’s Pregnant Woman, who allows her private parts, breasts, and buttocks to be exposed.

Nancy’s body language in the 1967 painting conveys trust between artist and sitter. Additionally, Allara states when describing this portrait that women embraced the idea of natural childbirth in the 1960s, and with the publication of Thank You, Dr. Lamaze (1965) and the Women’s Health Collective’s Our Bodies/Ourselves (1971), natural childbirth was a feminist

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stance—a way for women to give their bodies back to themselves. Trust between the artist and sitter and changing ideas regarding labor might have affected Neel’s depiction of Nancy’s first pregnancy portrait. The result is an image of a confident, self-possessed pregnant woman, who, like Bach and Evans, challenges both the tradition of the female nude and negative feminist views of pregnancy.

In the later portrait, *The Pregnant Woman* (1971), however, Nancy looks like a completely different woman. She is shown lying on her side, exposing her buttocks; her arms are in a similar arrangement as in *Childbirth* (1939). In the exhibition catalogue *Alice Neel: Painter of Modern Life*, Jeremy Lewison states that Nancy’s husband’s inclusion in the portrait is meant to symbolize his lack of understanding of and involvement in this stage of the pregnancy. The green hue engulfing Nancy represents the physical and mental sickness she was experiencing; she had been diagnosed with toxaemia as a result of pregnancy. Her awkward and sickly appearance removes the expectation of arousal from the nude, which Clark identified as its ultimate purpose. The paint is mostly concentrated on the body and the shadow that it implies on the couch, the same couch used in *Claudia Bach*. The rest of the canvas is left naked. It is the least detailed portrait in the series, but it is the most wrought with emotion. Gone is the calm from the first portrait of Nancy. It looks like an unfinished work of a woman in pain. This representation of pregnancy aligns more closely with the feminist movement as Nancy is shown to have no control over her body; her body has become a vessel.

As noted earlier, the female nude has been an instrument to satisfy the male gaze for centuries. Patricia Mathews, feminist writer and art historian, states how the genre has fashioned

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84 Allara: “Mater” of Fact,” 19.
the female body according to male desires and fantasies, without regard for women’s experiences of their own bodies.\textsuperscript{87} She references art historian T. J. Clark describing the traditional manner of viewing the nude:

A nude could hardly be said to do its work as a painting at all if it did not find a way to address the spectator and give him access to the body on display. He had to be offered a place outside the picture, and a way in; \ldots This was sometimes done simply by looking: by having the woman’s eyes and face, and her whole body, address themselves to the viewer, in the fashion of Ingres’s \textit{Venus Anadyomene}, 1848, or Titian’s \textit{Venus of Urbino}. That candour, that dreamy offering of self, that looking which was not quite looking: those were the nude’s most characteristic forms of address.\textsuperscript{88}

Clark’s description suggests why in the feminist movement artists were trying to reclaim the female nude by depicting themes of sexuality, self-love, and female genitalia. However, it also reveals the necessity Neel felt to depict something that the feminists were trying to avoid, that she considered to be a basic fact of life.

As has been shown in this analysis, the pregnancy portraits align with the feminist art movement in that they defy the academic tradition of depicting the classical nude as pure and modest with geometrical harmony. They also do not judge the modern woman as a sexual deviant like in Picasso’s \textit{Les Demoiselles d’Avignon}, 1907 (Fig. 19). Also, these women were part of the sexual revolution that the first contraceptive afforded women. This control and sexual self-possession is apparent in Neel’s portraits in the confidence with which most of her sitters display their bodies. Julie, for example, is not ashamed of her body, as her ribs bulge above the pressure of her protruding belly, and her hands do not cover her breasts modestly like a classical nude sculpture. Nor does she invite the viewer into her environment with an enticing look like in Titian’s \textit{Venus of Urbino} (1538) (Fig. 20). Although both Julie and the Venus recline, they differ


\textsuperscript{88} T. J. Clark quoted in Ibid., 419.
in gaze and body language. While Titian’s *Venus of Urbino* shows the seductive nature of the woman desired by the male gaze, and Picasso’s *Les Demoiselles d'Avidgnon* depicts the frightening “otherness” of female sexuality, Neel neither shows off the sitter’s body to appease the viewer’s sexual appetite nor depicts female sexuality as fearful. The pregnant woman’s sexual confidence is also apparent in *Claudia Bach*, which is reminiscent of Francisco Goya’s *The Nude Maja* (before 1800) (Fig. 21). The couch in both seems to accentuate the curve of the body, while the gaze questions the viewer. However, in *Claudia Bach*, her gaze and body posture teases the viewer that she is not offering herself to the viewer like *The Nude Maja* does. For, as Neel stated, the pregnant woman is “not for sale.” At times, Neel deliberately reinterprets the genre of the nude as when she set the composition of *Pregnant Maria* like Manet’s *Olympia* (1863) (Fig. 22). The way Neel’s series plays with the Western tradition of the female nude, in sum, suggests the works’ complex relationship to feminism. Even as they depict a subject, pregnancy, that many feminists believed compromised Women’s Liberation, they do so to undermine expectations of women as sexually submissive, a primary goal of feminist art.89

CONCLUSION

Contextualizing Neel’s portraits within feminist theory, comparing them to historical and contemporary representations of the nude female, and acknowledging Neel’s complicated relationship within the feminist art movement and Women’s Liberation reveals that her pregnancy portraits both align with feminism and break with it. Although she was pivotal to the feminist art movement, she decided to paint the one thing that most feminists were taking a stance against. While the subject of Neel's pregnant series put her at odds with the feminist movement, there were also ways in which her work aligned with its goals.

89 One painting was omitted from this analysis since I did not find it pertinent enough to my argument or discussed among my sources. Fig. 23 is *Betty Homitsky* (1968).
One important way was that her series performed a revision of the female nude. Traditionally, representations of the female nude have celebrated her sexual appeal, while stripping her of identity. The historical examples I referenced, such as Goya’s *Nude Maja*, Manet’s *Olympia*, and even Picasso’s *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*, were controversial in their time for depicting the modern woman. But they still objectify the female body, using her as a symbol for sexual deviance. Neel’s pregnant nudes, by contrast, depict the modern woman of the 1970s alternately as strong, fearful, present, and withdrawn. Neel’s pregnancy portraits are a way of documenting the loss of identity, while also depicting the modern woman in control of her body and sexuality. They contradict prior historical works credited for reinterpreting the nude by depicting varied individual experiences of female identity.

Neel participated in feminist revisionism, but it largely evolved from her long-standing interest in representing the modern woman and in pushing the boundaries of portraiture and the nude genre. The women in Neel’s pregnancy portraits are stripped of their clothes, but through body language, color palette, and gaze, she dresses them with a psychological consciousness that exposes their experience as generally more empowering than in her depictions of maternity from the 1930s. Neel’s depiction of her sitters’ varied experiences of pregnancy—which alternated between alienation and self-possession—reflects both her desire to capture the zeitgeist, which included Women’s Liberation, and her own evolving experiences of motherhood. Contextualizing her portraits within feminist theory, comparing them to historical and contemporary representations of the nude female, and acknowledging Neel’s relationship within the feminist art movement and Women’s Liberation, reveals a complicated relationship with the feminist movement. Neel’s pregnant portraits do not idealize pregnancy nor do they objectify women’s sexuality. They provide truth to something that Neel considered a basic fact of life.
Most importantly she does not paint the women as victims of a patriarchal society, but rather personifies their zeitgeist in the form of their body, sexuality, and identity.
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Image List

Fig. 1
Alice Neel
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Estate of Alice Neel, New York

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1930
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Francisco Goya
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Musée d’Orsay, Paris

Fig. 23
Alice Neel
Betty Homitsky
1968
60 x 36 in.
oil on canvas
Collection of Sandra and Gerald Fineberg
Fig. 3
It is easier to describe thoughts than feelings. It is easier to describe despair than joy. For these reasons, the writing gives a false impression there is not enough exaltation in it.

At that point, she writes: time is no longer a hindrance, but a means of making actual what is potential.
Fig. 8
Fig. 9
Fig. 14
Fig. 17